

The Congregation of Saint Athanasius
A sermon preached by Father Bradford on The Feast of the Holy Family
December 31, 2017

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Holy Church is our teacher. First she gives us Saint Luke's lovely account of the birth of Christ. Over the centuries this has provided the basis of countless expressions of faith in song, dance, and action, everything from lyric opera to school nativity plays. Then there are more things to consider in connection with the birth of Christ.

First we get Saint John's *Prologue*. "The Word was God and the Word was made flesh." This is a different approach to the Truth. You don't make a stage or concert piece out of this material! John's *Prologue* is what we might call a "theological impact statement." Then for three days we have examples of witness to Christ. The focus is on theory put into action in a variety of ways, one of which will be the life you and I will emulate. **Witness** is the English word for *martyr*, and we are presented with Saint Stephen, a martyr in will and deed, Saint John the Evangelist, a martyr in will and not in deed, and the Holy Innocents, martyrs not in will but in deed. These holy days after Christmas Day show what St John's Gospel had just told us. The world does not know who Christ is. But anyone who does accept Him He empowers to become the child of God.

Then on Sunday in the Octave of Christmas we have still more instruction. Today is the Feast of the Holy Family. The Church reminds us the Saviour was born into a family as a sign the family is the basic unit of society because first of Heaven. God is a Holy Trinity. Love does not exist in a vacuum. There must be someone to love. It is therefore unimaginable that Perfect Love being expressed eternally in the Trinity would come into His created order and not have the love of family.

Any family or individual soul which contains the Christ Child, His Mother, and St Joseph, will certainly deserve the title "The Holy Family." So what are we to do? In the lessons given today we are instructed this Holy Family devoutly observed the religious practices of the Church. By all standards these people might have been exempted. We all enjoy exemptions and being excused from obligations placed on everyone else! At Candlemas we see the Christ Child being presented to *Himself*. We see the purity of the Virgin Mary *being purified*. But this family observed all the rituals, worship, and practices of faith. The lesson is not to be lost on us.

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Fifty years ago a document of the Second Vatican Council called *Gaudium et Spes* already saw great dangers assaulting the dignity and integrity of the family. The dangers were named: the plague of divorce, free love, and contraceptive devices. Today we can name more. The Church saw the evolving economic, social, and civil climate as severely disruptive of family life. Is there anyone who still believes things have become better for family life in the past fifty years?

Whether we have a family or live alone, the family is our first school of holiness. Almighty God does not bring us to life and place us on a deserted South Seas island! He places us in a family. And that is the first place we have opportunity to put into practice the faith we are learning to profess. Later on we have opportunity to do this in a wider forum. But it all begins in the same way Our Lord Jesus experienced when the Word was made flesh.

The Feast of the Holy Family does not suggest we compare a false idealism of an idyllic scene at Bethlehem to our own more mundane family life. Sometimes our family experience provides a severe test to our faith and serves as an anti-model for our Christian conduct. The Gospel tells us what the *Hallmark* Christmas cards do not. The birth and upbringing of the Saviour included disruptions of family life, a birth in emergency and in crude accommodations, efforts to kill the baby, exile in a foreign land, and the parents' pangs of knowing they could not keep their child to themselves forever. There was also the early death of Saint Joseph. The Gospel is Good News, but it is not the prototype of a *Disney* movie!

Nevertheless family life was precious to God Incarnate. We notice so many things in His teachings that were put in the form of parables on family life. Here was God making known to us the mysteries of His love, not just in parables we can understand but in *parables we must enact*. That is why Our Lord's teaching is so powerful. It hits close to home! Jesus gives us the friendship of the Holy Trinity in a way that makes it hard for us to worship Almighty God if we are being false in our own selves to the human family.

By His wonderful birth at Bethlehem, Our Blessed Lord sanctified the life of the home. He intends the family to be the first place where we grow in the knowledge

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and practice of His love, for the fulfilling of His law, and the sharing of one another's burdens.